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SUBJECT: AN OPPORTUNITY TO REVITALIZE THE U.S.-MOROCCO
PARTNERSHIP AND INCREASE MUTUAL UNDERSTANDING

REF: STATE 021427

¶1. (SBU) Summary: A group of young Moroccan experts told Charge and S/P staff member Behrman that the Obama Administration offers an opportunity to revitalize the U.S.-Moroccan partnership. Morocco is a strategic partner and its progress on human rights and democracy benefits U.S. interests. They expressed hope that President Obama would be the first U.S. President to make a state visit to the Kingdom. Radicalization is Morocco's greatest challenge, they said, and encouraged the U.S. to craft a policy toward the North Africa countries distinct from the greater Arab/Muslim world. Rebranding the Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI) as the American Partnership Initiative would be an effective way of eliminating some ill will directed toward the program in Morocco and the region, while maintaining its many benefits. End Summary.

¶2. (U) On March 18, the Charge and A/DCM hosted seven mostly young leaders representing government, non-governmental organizations, think tanks, and business groups for a dinner with S/P staff member Greg Behrman.

Morocco on Irreversible Path of Reform

¶3. (SBU) "We are on an irreversible path to democracy. We don't need someone to assist us. We have implemented bigger and better reforms than our neighbors, and we need a partnership based on equality," emphasized Mohamed Benhammou, Chairman of the Moroccan Center for Strategic Studies, and sole elder among the group. Underlining the strategic importance of Morocco as the crossroads of Africa and Europe, its leadership in the Arab world, and progress in human rights and democracy, the other participants echoed this hope that the U.S. would forge a deeper partnership with Morocco. "We need more than a Free Trade Agreement," Abdelouahed Driouche, Administrative Advisor at the Chamber of Representatives, insisted. Sherif Belkhatat of Capital Business Consulting expressed a hope for greater business cooperation between the U.S. and Morocco, noting that Morocco's geographical location could make it a hub for investors.

Obama Would Be First President to Make State Visit

¶4. (SBU) U.S. policy should reinforce Morocco's moves toward democracy, women's rights, and human rights, the participants agreed. Moroccans would welcome a visit by President Obama with the goal of consolidating this partnership, they said, adding that there has not been an official presidential visit to Morocco since President Roosevelt came to meet Churchill in Casablanca during World War II. (Note: They excluded

President Clinton's attendance at the funeral of King Hassan II in 1999.)

¶5. (SBU) Yasmina Serhouney, Executive Director of the focus group organization People's Mirror (who wears a headscarf), said she would be "devastated" if President Obama went to Saudi Arabia because "the women there are all covered up." Morocco is generally moving forward on reforms, she asserted, and because of this remains a symbol of hope and change for North Africa and the Middle East, and the best interlocutor for the United States.

Radicalization Is Morocco's Greatest Challenge

¶6. (SBU) Calling radicalization the most pressing challenge facing Morocco today, participants emphasized the need for the United States to provide greater support to moderate Islamic voices. Any assistance should be provided indirectly, they stressed, to avoid the appearance of meddling. Noting the massive demographic shift from rural to urban centers over the last 50 years, the four-fold increase in Morocco's population, the decrease in the average age of the population, and the rapidity with which reforms are being implemented, participants observed that radical Islamic teachings may hold appeal for those whose sense of identity is adrift. "We have a very big problem with Al Jazeera," said Driouche. "We need something like Al Jazeera that emphasizes moderation and that shows the diversity of Moroccan identity, which includes Arabs, Berbers, Jews, Christians, and Muslims," he stated. (Note: Al Jazeera is

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the consensus source of news in Morocco, but is perceived as having a political, fundamentalist agenda.)

¶7. (SBU) Serhouney observed that youth lack ideological choices in Moroccan politics and are frustrated by having to choose between the stale establishment and Islamists. As a result, voter turnout is low. "When I think that one day the ability to protest through blank ballots (by not voting) may no longer be satisfying to them, I get scared," she said. Siham El Figuigi, formerly with the American Bar Association (ABA) but now working for the British Embassy, agreed, asserting that unless something is done "to reduce the tension felt by the youth" there is a huge risk of polarization between the moderates and the radicals. "Even ordinary citizens can become radical and violent," she emphasized.

Many Muslim Worlds

¶8. (SBU) Bemoaning what they called a lack of U.S. strategy toward North Africa, participants complained that when it comes to policy, the only statements on Morocco come in the form of the human rights report. The new administration has a chance to correct this, they said, and urged policy-makers to refrain from viewing the "Muslim world" as a monolith whose problems can be solved by the same blanket policy. There are "many Muslim worlds" from Morocco to Pakistan and each region has its own unique challenges. Crafting policy toward distinct Muslim regions, such as North Africa or the Gulf, would be much more effective and allow the U.S. to better address common trans-national challenges such as terrorism, they agreed.

U.S. Policy toward Israel Impacts Morocco

¶9. (SBU) U.S. policy toward Israel has a tremendous impact beyond Israel's borders, the participants observed. "Events in Palestine impact all aspects of life here and lead to an

anti-U.S. reaction in Morocco, North Africa, and the Middle East," stated Youssef El Falah, Deputy Director of the American Bar Association's (ABA's) Morocco office. Discussing Middle East policies more seriously with Morocco could be another aspect of a more robust U.S.-Morocco partnership, attendees opined.

A Fresh Start for MEPI

¶10. (SBU) Participants agreed that the Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI) has been useful and has successfully targeted critical areas of reform. However, they noted that from the Moroccan perspective, MEPI needs a "make-over." "We do not consider ourselves part of the Middle East," El Figuigi asserted, emphasizing that lumping Morocco into the Middle East was a gross oversimplification. Linking the program by name to unpopular USG policies in the Middle East was counterproductive, she added. Other participants agreed that MEPI is also viewed by many as part of a crusade by the U.S. Government to develop "backwards Arabs." They suggested underlining that these funds come from the American people, not the U.S. Government. Rebranding MEPI as the "American Partnership Initiative" would eliminate these negative connotations and give what is otherwise a positive program a fresh start.

¶11. (U) S/P member Behrman did not have an opportunity to review this message before he departed.

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